



Education as Emancipation: A Subaltern Reading of Yendluri Sudhakar's "An Autobiography"

Jaswa Jebaraj A

M.A., NET, SET, Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Don Bosco Arts and Science College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Received: 27 Jan 2026; Received in revised form: 21 Feb 2026; Accepted: 25 Feb 2026; Available online: 28 Feb 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines the emancipatory potential of education in dismantling caste-based oppression through a subaltern reading of Yendluri Sudhakar's poem "An Autobiography." It explores the historical evolution of caste stratification in India and foregrounds the lived realities of Dalit communities whose socio-economic and cultural marginalization has persisted despite constitutional guarantees of equality. While several regressive practices such as sati and child marriage have been legally abolished, caste discrimination continues in both rural and urban spaces, often manifesting in violent practices like honour killings. Through Sudhakar's autobiographical reflections, this paper argues that education becomes a transformative instrument enabling Dalits to reclaim dignity, identity, and intellectual space within mainstream discourse.



Keywords— Upper caste, discrimination, Dalits, education, subaltern, memory

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously observed that human beings are born free yet everywhere in chains. Though his formulation addressed political inequality, it resonates profoundly with the Indian caste system, which imposes social hierarchies from birth. While theological narratives claim divine creation of humanity as equal, historical processes shaped systems that institutionalized inequality. Among the most rigid of these systems is caste, a stratified social order that determines one's occupation, social status, and access to resources from the moment of birth.

Unlike class distinctions elsewhere, often grounded in economic or ethnic differences, caste in India codifies hereditary privilege and deprivation. Initially rationalized as a division of labour, it evolved into an entrenched structure serving the interests of dominant groups. Those positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy—commonly referred to as "subalterns"—have historically been denied social, economic, and educational rights. The term "subaltern," derived from the Latin *subalternus* ("below" or "inferior"), signifies those relegated to subordinate status. In India, Dalits embody this marginalized category, enduring systematic exclusion and dehumanization for centuries.

Yendluri Sudhakar, a prominent Telugu Dalit writer and academic, emerges as a powerful voice within this context. Rather than yielding to oppression, he pursued education relentlessly and rose to become a professor and Head of the Department at Potti Sri Ramulu Telugu University. His poem "An Autobiography" becomes both personal testimony and collective memory, chronicling generational trauma while celebrating the liberatory power of education.

The caste system's ideological foundation is frequently traced to texts such as the Manusmriti, which perpetuated the myth that Shudras emerged from the feet of Brahma and were destined for servitude. Such narratives justified the relegation of Dalits to menial occupations including manual scavenging and sanitation work. As Susan Bayly observes, caste has historically structured entitlement and disability within Indian society (307). Similarly, Sangeetha Rao questions the textual inconsistencies regarding the number and origin of varnas, thereby exposing the dubious legitimacy of caste hierarchies (50).

Caste discrimination extends beyond occupational segregation to regulate marriage, property ownership, mobility, and even bodily autonomy. Inter-caste marriages often provoke violent reprisals, including honour killings—

acts committed under the pretext of preserving familial "honour." Dalits were denied land ownership and frequently dispossessed of ancestral property. They were reduced to labourers on lands that once belonged to them, experiencing not only economic exploitation but also psychological humiliation.

Sudhakar's poem poignantly juxtaposes his present dignity with his ancestors' degradation. Invited as chief guest to a formal function, he sits among dignitaries on the dais—an image laden with historical irony. His mind travels back to a time when Dalits were prohibited from entering villages and forced to live on the outskirts. The simple act of being offered water evokes memories of upper-caste individuals pouring water from a height, compelling Dalits to drink without physical contact, as if they were animals. Education, he realizes, has reversed this humiliating dynamic.

The ceremonial presentation of a shawl triggers another painful recollection. Dalit women were once denied the right to cover their upper bodies, subjected to public shaming and sexual exploitation. Sudhakar recalls, "The vague figure of my blouseless / Grandmother cuts my heart." Dalit women bore the dual burden of caste and gender oppression. As Devasahyam argues, they carry a "double cross"—subjugated both as Dalits and as women (157). Sexual violence against Dalit women often went unpunished, as perpetrators exploited caste privilege to evade justice.

Sudhakar also remembers restrictions on clothing and footwear. Dalits were forced to remove sandals when passing upper-caste streets and sometimes required to carry them in hand. The line "Clay feet of my shoeless great grandfathers" encapsulates the relentless toil of ancestors who laboured barefoot under harsh conditions for meagre sustenance. They were denied access to temples, common roads, and burial grounds, reinforcing spatial segregation as a mechanism of control.

Food, another marker of dignity, becomes a symbol of humiliation. Dalits were given leftovers, often thrown on the ground. Eating sand-mixed food became a matter of survival. These recollections underscore the extent of social exclusion practiced in a nation that now constitutionally guarantees equality.

Education, however, disrupts this continuum of degradation. Sudhakar's ascent into academia illustrates its transformative power. Though he faced discrimination even within educational institutions—teachers despising him due to caste identity—he persisted. Walter Fernandes notes that Dalits' resistance to dehumanization provokes reaction from vested interests, yet it also signifies emerging identity and

assertion (3). Education empowers Dalits to articulate their experiences and claim intellectual authority.

Dalit literature thus emerges as literature of protest and reclamation. Autobiography becomes a potent medium, enabling writers to document lived realities previously silenced. Kancha Ilaiah asserts that Dalit literature alone can challenge the "hinduised" and "sanskritised" canon of Indian literature. Sudhakar's poem aligns with this tradition, contesting dominant narratives and demanding recognition.

Non-Dalit writers have also addressed caste injustice. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* exposes systemic humiliation through the character of Bakha and the molestation of Sohini. Similarly, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays racial injustice through Tom Robinson's wrongful conviction. Though contexts differ, both works parallel Dalit oppression in their depiction of structural inequality and denial of justice.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims equality and inherent dignity for all human beings. Yet, caste discrimination persists as a social reality. Sudhakar's poem affirms that education serves as a catalyst for dismantling entrenched prejudice. By situating himself on the dais—once an inaccessible space—he symbolizes generational transformation.

Dalit writers today challenge literary marginalization, though publishing industries historically privileged upper-caste voices. Their assertion reflects a broader social movement toward equality. Education does not merely confer degrees; it restores agency, reconstructs identity, and reclaims humanity.

Yendluri Sudhakar's "An Autobiography" stands as a testament to the emancipatory force of education. Through personal memory and collective history, the poem exposes the brutality of caste oppression while celebrating intellectual empowerment. Caste remains a malignant social reality, but education offers a path toward dismantling its ideological foundations. Sudhakar's narrative ultimately affirms that liberation begins with awareness, articulation, and academic empowerment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Penguin Books, 2001.
- [2] Bayly, Susan. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge UP, 2005.
- [3] Devasahyam, V. *Dalits & Women: Quest for Humanity*. The Gurukul Summer Institute, 1992.
- [4] Fernandes, Walter, editor. *The Emerging Dalit Identity: The Re-assertion of the Subalterns*. Indian Social Institute, 1996.
- [5] Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1960.

- [6] Paswan, Sanjay, and Pramanshi Jaideva, editors. *Encyclopaedia of Dalits: General Study*. Vol. 1, Kalpaz Publications, 2002.
- [7] Rao, R. Sangeetha. *Caste System in India: Myth and Reality*. India Publishers and Distributors, 1989.
- [8] Sudhakar, Yendluri. "An Autobiography." Dr. Yendluri Sudhakar, 17 Jan. 2019, dpstarts.com/yendlurisudhakar/an-autobiography/